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ED 502 Teaching Reading

07-12-93

Journal Articles: Perception, Paradox, and Passion: Curriculum for Community, by Louise M. Berman.

*She must be finished by now*

I have been concentrating of late on the process of "knowing" or cognition in my journal reading. I had been hoping to use some of the research on my paper for my ED-401. Anyway, some of this reading has led me into some very interesting esoteric corners.

*I vaguely remember this*

One of the last articles that I had read (Vallance, Conflicting Conceptions) reviewed several curriculum paradigms that were first presented in a 1973 article of the same name.

The journal author notes:

Of the five conflicting conceptions evident in the curriculum literature of a dozen years ago, the self-actualizing perspective has probably suffered the most, losing its saliency to the changes of society that has become increasingly practical and job-oriented in its demands on the curriculum. (Vallance, p. 25)

*What do you think of Berman's views?*

I bring this up because Professor Berman begins with a quote and sentiment right out of the late 60's/early 70's.

To learn how to live is also to learn how to die. Those who see this steadily can live each day as if it were their last because they can keep in their consciousness the context in which human life has to be lived. They can thus concentrate on the "quality of life which goes beyond the mere fact of life."

In a nut-shell Berman's reflection of curriculum is based on the "unmeasured curriculum." This a curriculum that celebrates the subjective, imperfect, sometimes negative aspects of human experience and therefore human life. Berman feels that a measured curriculum that concentrates on test scores, correct

answers and letter grades makes for a poor preparation to life and ignores a whole part of what it means to be human.

The tenor of Berman's article is a bit too altruistic for me to reach. I agree, however, in the importance of replacing the false notion that answering a question correctly is the only means of assessing achievement. The whole idea about learning encompassing failure and imperfection would seem to consistent with a constructivist/Whole Language attitude about learning. I just feel that Berman expresses these important ideas in such a way that only someone with an appreciation of "Crosby, Still, Nash and Young" could really believe in.

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swers or solutions to the problems confronting school systems. They may believe they do not have the time or the freedom to develop the deep understanding of curricular issues required to provide an adequate response to the problems of schools.

While practitioners may not find it difficult to understand the curriculum as an event, it may be difficult for them to maintain an awareness of the complex interrelationships among curricular contexts in the face of the demanding, fast-paced reality of classroom life. Both practitioners and researchers may at times simplify their tasks in order to carry out particular curriculum projects. However, even as they narrow the focus of their undertakings, the underlying realization that the curriculum is a situated event can inform and enrich their work.

tip

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Louise M. Berman

## Perception, Paradox, and Passion: Curriculum for Community

To learn how to live is also to learn how to die. Those who see this steadily can live each day as if it were their last because they can keep in their consciousness the context in which human life has to be lived. They can thus concentrate on the "quality of life which goes beyond the mere fact of life." (Peters, 1973, p. 128)

The context of human life is viewed by some as an imposed world constructed of theories and facts laid upon the individual. From this viewpoint the task of education is the mediation of facts and the individual (Palmer, 1983, p. 21). Education becomes a vehicle for controlling the knowledge of the outside world that students learn. Within such a framework, the products of education can be easily considered in quantifiable scores and the language of education becomes that of numbers.

A concentration on the quality of life evokes a different set of assumptions. The process of knowing is intimately bound up with being so that the knower and the known are constantly being reconstructed and transformed. Knower and known are not separate entities. Knowledge is constructed and shaped by persons within the community (Palmer, 1983). The teacher focuses on evoking what lies hidden rather than imposing what is "out there." Sharing life stories, listening compassionately, and questioning each other's experiences while undertaking a common pilgrimage are central to views of education in which life is lived with quality.

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The individual in compassionate relationship with others becomes the central thread of the curriculum. The context shared by those in such relationship becomes the setting for thinking about curriculum development. What may be right in one setting may be wrong in another. "In education, as in love, explicit proposals are best limited to a single recipient" (Arnstine, 1983, p. 20). The outcomes of tailor-made curriculum proposals based on the concept that life can be worthwhile are the development of more concern for "what really matters," more refined sensitivities, and more exquisite judgments. The measured curriculum, defined in terms of control, test scores, and knowledge "out there," is replaced by curriculum which places priority on compassion, sharing of life stories, and inner knowledge.

Good schools, says Lightfoot (1983), writing about six "good" high schools, make "imperfections visible and open for inspection" (p. 310), admit "human frailty and vulnerability as integral to work-ness" (p. 311), care about [their] weakest members (p. 349), see students as worthy of respect (p. 350), possess a "vivid ideological stance" (p. 311), welcome change, and anticipate imperfections (p. 311). Good schools are self-critical, always willing to deal with their imperfections. Such a value stance is characterized by encouraging multiple ways of conducting inquiry, allowing for "jagged stages of institutional development" (p. 313), building on the school's history (whether or not it appears to be commendable), planning for intensity and creativity as well as rational thought, and providing problematic experiences as a basis for inviting en-

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chantment with the ethical. The good school's strength may be in its attention to the unmeasured curriculum rather than only, to the measured, to health as well as illness, to what is happening that is positive as well as to what is negative.

The unmeasured curriculum includes attention to what is going on in the hearts as well as the minds of those involved in curriculum making. Curriculum is not seen as a set of behavioral objectives nor as a written guide. It is a thrust rather than a detailed plan and builds on the inner knowledge of students and teachers rather than only on knowledge in the text. Curriculum building is seen as engagement through the dialogical process by teachers and students.

In the measured curriculum, attention is frequently focused on the surface meanings of the concepts under scrutiny. In the unmeasured curriculum, multilayered meanings and fragile structures are constantly interpreted and reinterpreted. Life becomes valuable because of rich experience and the possibility of even richer experience. Knowledge is seen as intimate and subjective, rather than impersonal and objective. It is not impervious to question and refinement.

In discussing a view of curriculum where quality of life is a unifying theme, this article focuses on settings, persons, and practice.

#### Settings

Settings have a strong influence on the quality of life. Although students and teachers spend long hours in educational contexts, adequate attention is not given to what they see, take, manipulate, and create in those settings. Viewing quality of life from an insider's perspective, the following concepts are a sample of those that might be considered in the unmeasured curriculum.

#### Paradox and Ambiguity

Current curricular practice frequently builds on the assumption that the world is clean, neat, and unambiguous. A more realistic appraisal of the setting indicates that the student frequently faces ambiguity, paradox, and lack of clarity. However, school critiques and recommendations often make a case for "common" curricula with little attention to the complexities of social and educational settings. The world is many-faceted, not fixed, and the knowledge people have of it becomes obsolete as people feel, learn, change, and deal with the ambivalences of life. The "same being who is good and generous

can also be annoying and imperfect" (Merleau-Ponty, 1964, p. 103).

The discipline of democracy has been described as "preferred ways of relating among people" (Miel & Brogan, 1957, p. 4). Contradiction and paradox are integral to it. For example, democratic socialization involves the somewhat paradoxical but interwoven processes of individuation and socialization. "Democracy's valued concept of respect for people represents deliberate attempts to deal constructively with likeness and difference in our organized social living" (Miel & Brogan, 1957, p. 7). Those responsible for the creation of social settings can help people "manage paradox" (Peters & Waterman, 1982, p. 91). While paradox can produce anxiety, risk takers in various fields have learned to enjoy it as well as deal with it.

#### Freedom

Like paradox, freedom can be both exhilarating and anxiety producing. Because of anxiety, people act only on what they perceive as possibilities. Teachers are present to students only if they appeal to their freedom (Greene, 1974, p. 84).

Students are greatly constrained through standardized curricula. Such curricula are frequently not perceived as leading in the directions students define for themselves. Thus the best intentions of educators do not come to fruition, for the possibilities of students and those of educators may be at odds with each other.

Views of freedom vary. Macquarrie (1982) states that an individual has a "leading edge . . . a conscious rational, unifying, and discriminating element that leads us in one direction rather than another" (p. 14). Creative freedom is the outcome of such a view. Sartre (1956), on the other hand, claims individuals begin with nothing and then decide what they will become. Studies in the decades ahead might focus on perceived views of freedom and their meaning for curriculum development. For example, if Macquarrie's view is investigated, what are the unifying elements that lead a particular student in one direction rather than another? If Sartre's view is accepted, how do students determine the constraints under which they will live?

#### Perception

A milieu is constructed by individuals for themselves. How individuals perceive a milieu is non-measurable, for they give only glimpses to others of what they perceive.

The psyche or the psychic is *what is given to only one person*. . . what constitutes the psyche in me or in others is something incommunicable. I alone am able to grasp my psyche. . . the psyche of another appears to me as radically inaccessible, at least in its own existence. I cannot reach other lives, other thought processes, since by hypothesis they are open only to inspection by a single individual: the one who owns them. (Merleau-Ponty, 1964, p. 114)

If the lives of individuals are inaccessible to all but the ones who own them, provision must be made for the expression of how settings are perceived—the persons in them, the materials available, and the concepts and knowledge to be learned. Curricular practices can make provision for students to share how they make sense of the objects and ideas within the spaces they occupy.

#### Perception, Freedom, and Dialectic

In discussing the work of Merleau-Ponty, Glenn (1980, p. 93) indicates that the person does not have total freedom. "His existence involves a continuing dialectical tension, even interplay, between a relatively stable and implicit background and the relatively spontaneous emergence of conscious, personal, and free activity." Other points of tension which people experience are nature and culture, language and speech, and self and other.

Current conceptions of individuals within settings frequently attribute them with godlike qualities. Individuals are seen as possessing power over other persons, systems, technologies, and objects. Languages of manipulation and control are prevalent in such conceptions.

The unmeasured curriculum attempts to consider individuals in settings from the perspectives of their unknowing, their paradoxes and ambiguities, and their ambivalences about freedom. It deals with problems of dialectic, weighing and reconciling differences, dealing with inner conflicts, and considering interrelationships among parts. The proper use of freedom demands educational settings which deal with the complexities of being human.

#### Qualities of Persons

Describing behaviors in a linear manner makes for easy evaluation. In the measured curriculum, however, the assessment of behaviors does not take into account the mix of qualities necessary for successful living in today's difficult world. Such qualities need to be learned and practiced in non-

linear curricula. They include refinement of judgment, tension between reasonableness and compassion, the self as passionate chooser, and the gift of commitment.

#### Refinement of Judgment

Judgment is a process which includes perceiving what is "out there," assimilating perceptions in terms of past knowledge and ethical tendencies, and forming conclusions based on inner processes which are neither visible nor measurable. Judgment involves compromising between good alternatives, establishing vision, and revising vision. It involves living in problematic situations or dealing constructively with the conflicts inherent in dilemmas. Judgment also involves being able to incorporate the unanticipated.

The person who demonstrates refined judgment can reflect on processes and outcomes, take stock of imperfections, and reflect on the moral quality of the judgment. Gorovitz (1982, p. 79) writes that "moral judgments involve an elusive, complex, yet centrally important cluster of concepts: justice, human dignity, rights, the resolution of conflict among rights, equity, integrity, virtue, duty, and the rightness and wrongness of action."

The unmeasured curriculum offers opportunities to exercise judgment in situations where problem definition may be elusive and complex. Answers may not be easy or "right," but people learn to struggle with the dilemmas of judgment making in difficult situations.

#### Self as Passionate Chooser

Related to the concept of refined judgment is the concept of the self as passionate chooser. According to Peters (1973, p. 36), the first stage of moral development is becoming a chooser rather than being beset by irrationality in its various forms. The development of choice making is ordinarily limited and people frequently become programmed rather than becoming choosers.

Much of what we teach in school (e.g., mathematics) has a fixed path to decision making. Life, however, does not move in such a linear fashion.

Not all decisions can be made in accordance with a procedure that is guaranteed to yield the desired result if followed correctly. Instead, a person faced with a decision must often depend on some elusive combination of taste, hunch, intuition, and skill of a sort that is impossible to characterize rigorously. (Gorovitz, 1982, p. 114)



Problems and dilemmas of human existence involve venturing out, becoming intimately concerned with the human condition, and entering passionately into the decision. "Genuine decisions never happen to a man" . . . one must "enter into the decision itself—that is, the source of the existential notion that there can be no such thing as objective determination where existential problems are concerned" (Sontag, 1979, p. 42).

When a person deals with matters of significance, a point comes when the individual stands alone. The person can reject the burden of decision and aloneness, can "pretend that some historical destiny controls it," or can make a leap to a decisive conclusion (Sontag, 1979, pp. 43, 44). Human beings need to learn to deal with the challenge thrust upon them or lose that sense of decisiveness and hence suffer a diminished existence.

Fully human personal choices are informed by passion (Peterson, 1973, p. 53). The unmeasured curriculum helps a person become knowledgeable and sensitized through exploration of endeavors made part of the cultural heritage by imaginative individuals. It also provides opportunities for reflection on what transpires in the choice-making process.

#### Reasonableness and Compassion

Reasonableness is a way of conducting life. It is "a manner of traveling, not any particular destination" (Peterson, 1973, p. 102). Persons living at the highest levels of reasonableness not only know rules, standards, and codes, they care desperately about them. Because their reason has become finely tuned, they are self-critical and self-reflective about their passions. Reasonableness turns to inspired vision and confidence in "growth, freedom, and the miracle of vital change" (Cousins, 1983, p. 7).

In the unmeasured curriculum a dichotomy does not exist between knowing and caring, but rather knowing is used to live life more compassionately (Palmer, 1983).

#### The Gift of Commitment

Macquarrie (1982) has defined commitment as "the acceptance of a continuing obligation to pursue some goal or policy or action" (p. 141). In a sense, commitment is a freely accepted limit on freedom. Commitment is "self-forming, self-transcending, and self-limiting" (p. 142). It is a gift in that something is received before it is given out. "Every commitment is a response to someone or something that has elicited it" (p. 150).

Because human beings are limited in terms of time, resources, wisdom, and experience, commitments must be limited. The issue for curriculum becomes how to assist people in being open enough in their perceptions, selective enough in their passions, and wise enough in their choosing to make worthwhile commitments. The unmeasured curriculum becomes a way of providing opportunities for experiences which encourage growth and change in a number of directions simultaneously.

#### Messages for the Illumination of Practice

If concepts of goodness, self-reflection, self-criticism, dilemma, and related ideas are seen as central to purposes of the curriculum, inquiry into curricular practice might focus on the following areas:

1. *Quality of classroom activities.* Do the activities invite exploration into the nature of truth, goodness, suffering, and love (Peterson, 1973, pp. 124-128)? What opportunities are provided for people to determine the hidden values within an activity and to uncover the values toward which they feel drawn?
2. *Language of the classroom.* Is attention given to the different meanings students and teachers bring to the same language or activity? Do people think about the meanings of questions? How do teachers pick up and build upon the meanings students bring to a question or situation?
3. *Reliance on schemes, taxonomies, and stages as guideposts to observable behaviors.* Are the stages and distinctions among categories truly viable? What kinds of assistance do curriculum workers need in dealing with a student's ability to handle dilemmas, self-criticism, and dialogue? What replacements are necessary for the traditional taxonomies and developmental stages upon which educators frequently build?
4. *Environments.* What does a given environment mean to those within it? How can educated persons gain a sense of mastery over the numerous environments in which they live? (Griffiths, 1980, p. 3). How can dialogue be encouraged in which people talk about the meanings of their "physical, social, ethical, cultural, literary, and technological" (p. 3) environments?

Other questions about the environment, as suggested by Rogers (1984), might include: How does the school environment affect children's social and political views? How does one think about one's self when the physically disabled become part of the school milieu? when new programs for the gifted

and talented are started? when systems for rewards and punishments are changed? (p. 102).

5. *Opportunities to engage in the dialogical process.* If people are concerned about becoming aware, interpreting, and finding fresh insights through dialogue, educational settings need to be studied in terms of opportunities for dialogue which assist people in recovery of meaning and sense making (Darroch & Sivers, 1982, pp. 175-176). Patience in unfolding or knowing the social world and tolerance about the indirect path in the telling of that world are critical if the inner worlds of students and teachers are considered significant in curriculum development.

The focus on the measured curriculum—test scores, numbers of credits, and grade point averages—has frequently ruled out much teaching of human experience that is not measurable. Emphasizing test scores focuses attention on opportunities after high school and gives little attention to the educational potential of studies at the time they are undertaken (Arnstine, 1983, pp. 16-17).

To deal with aspirations, hopes, and dilemmas, students need a rich, invigorating, and problematic curriculum. Such an unmeasured curriculum can help students to better deal with the unmeasurable elements of life.

#### Notes

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1. Quotation within block quotation attributed to Whitehead (1926, p. 80).

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